

Vacaville Reporter

Library Lawyers

Program provides many with legal advice

By Darryl Richardson

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When Shane Massello realized his former landlord was not going to return a security deposit he believed he was entitled to, his first thought was to go to court for the money. The amount involved, however, was not enough to justify bringing in a lawyer and Massello didn't know how to begin a case in small claims court.

Program Information

Interested in free legal advice through the program? Arrive at the Vacaville library, 1020 Ulatis Drive, at 4 p.m. on the following dates: April 23, May 7, May 21, June 4 or June 18. Appointments will be taken at 4:05 p.m. The attorney visits will begin at 6 p.m and last until 8 p.m.

Fortunately for Massello and other local people with similar problems, the Vacaville Public Library has a new program designed to assist people with legal questions. The Lawyer in the Library program is an offshoot of a long-standing program at the Vallejo library, which has proven to be very effective in providing people with free, unbiased advice. The Vacaville program kicked off in March and has proven to be so popular during its first two sessions that it has already expanded from one meeting per month to two.

"I knew about the Vallejo program and wanted to see if it would work here," said Dick Brownell, who is coordinating the program for the library. "I knew there would be some demand for this, but I was really pleased with the turnout for the first two sessions." Because the program is just starting in Vacaville, only two attorneys are available during the two-hour sessions. Those wishing to speak to the attorneys are allowed up to 20 minutes to discuss their cases and receive advice on how to proceed.

"Basically I just shoot them in the right direction," said Gene Windham, a Vacaville attorney specializing in probate and tax law who helped out earlier this week. "Sometimes the case is outside our areas, but we can at least give them some clues on if they have a case and how to go from here."

Brownell said the first two programs have featured questions on almost every type of legal problem imaginable.

"We have seen conflicts with neighbors, family law issues, immigration and financial problems," he said. "All kinds of things you don't need to go to court to resolve."

Most of the people attending the most recent session said they were simply looking for advice on whether they have a legal case and how to proceed from here.

"I'm here to get advice because I don't know what to do next," said Charlene Jerrell of Suisun, who was seeking help with a financial issue. "I like the fact that I can find out what is and isn't available for me. The fact that an attorney will talk to me and I can ask them questions is great."

Part of the agreement the participants must sign before meeting with the attorney is that the attorney is not able to serve as the person's lawyer during any action in the matter. This fact is very important to many of the participants, including Massello.

"It's a tremendous help," he said. "They are simply answering questions without thinking of how they can make money. It's nice to not have to worry about seeing a biased attorney."

After a 10-minute meeting with Windham, Massello said the discussion was everything he hoped for.

"It was excellent," he said. "I wanted to get some information on how to continue and I got more than I was expecting. It sounds like we will be able to get everything we want and then some and if the judge is in a good mood, we might get even more!"

Because the Vacaville program is just starting up, Brownell said the number of people who can be seen each night is small, but plans are already in place to increase the totals. "Because we only have two attorneys per night right now, we can only see about 15 people each night," he said. "The Vallejo program has four attorneys each night, so they can see more people. It's too early to tell, but I think we will likely have another attorney here soon."

Brownell also said a partnership with the Solano County Bar Association should help get the word out to attorneys who might want to donate their time.

"This is a pure pro-bono project," Brownell said. "We really commend them for coming in during the evening and helping out."

The initial demand for legal services was what prompted Brownell to add a second session each month. He said the plan is to hold the event on the first and third Tuesdays of each month, but the schedule is somewhat different for the next several months. The next sessions will be held on April 23, May 7 and 21 and June 4 and 18.